



Oh My Aching Back!

Benjamin H. Venger, MD, FACS

Everyone, at one time or another has a backache. Ninety nine percent of the time the pain goes away in only a few hours to days. Unfortunately, some of us suffer more long-term problems related to the lumbar spine (back). Usually this results in back discomfort, pain radiating down the legs, or both.

Following an injury, the disc (cartilage between the bones of the spine) may push out (slip or herniate) and cause pressure upon the nerves of the spine. If this pain does not resolve by itself, medication, physical therapy, chiropractic treatments, or spinal blocks (injections) may help. If not, then the herniated portion of the disc may need to be removed with surgery (disectomy).

The most common reason for back pain lasting more than a few days to weeks is arthritis, including aging with wear and tear on the spinal bones and discs. Arthritis is actually abnormal calcium deposits, which narrow the passages for the individual nerve roots of the spine. This too can also respond to any of the treatments for herniated discs, as described above. If this is unsuccessful, then surgery to remove these calcium deposits (laminectomy) is necessary.

Aging can also cause bulging or collapse of the disc, and loosening of the ligaments that hold the spine together. Surgery to treat this condition not only necessitates removal of the calcium deposits, but also the insertion of metal plates and screws (fusion). This "hardware" is needed to stop the abnormal movement of the spine, and the pain that eventually follows.